

AVON



SCIENCE FICTION

35¢

READER NO. 1

The WAR of the SEXES by Edmond Hamilton



other great stories by
MURRAY LEINSTER
WALLACE WEST
A. MERRITT
JACK WILLIAMSON
and many more

Contents and Acknowledgements

- THE WAR OF THE SEXES** *by Edmond Hamilton* 3
Copyright, 1933, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company
for *Weird Tales* magazine.
- GREEN GLORY** *by Frank Belknap Long* 25
Copyright, 1934, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. By permission of the author.
- THE IMMEASURABLE HORROR** *by Clark Ashton Smith* 34
Copyright, 1931, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company
for *Weird Tales* magazine.
- THE MORRISON MONUMENT** *by Murray Leinster* 45
Copyright, 1935, by the Frank A. Munsey Co. By permission of the author.
- THE INCUBATOR MAN** *by Wallace West* 65
Copyright, 1928, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company
for *Weird Tales* magazine.
- THE DARK SIDE OF ANTRI** *by Sewell Peaslee Wright* 71
Reprinted by permission of the author with arrangement
through Ackerman Fantasy Agency.
- BLIND FLIGHT** *by Donald A. Wollheim* 88
Copyright, 1941, by Manhattan Fiction Publications. By permission of the author.
- RHYTHM OF THE SPHERES** *by A. Merritt* 95
Copyright, 1934, by A. Merritt.
- MADNESS OF THE DUST** *by R. F. Starzl* 105
Copyright, 1932, by *Amazing Stories*.
- THE COSMIC EXPRESS** *by Jack Williamson* 116
Copyright, 1930, by Teck Publishing Co., Inc.

Madness of the Dust

by R. F. Starzl

Men who are isolated in lonely places can and do crack up. At least, for them, the radio remains some sort of communication with their home bases. But what of the man isolated in some mining or expeditionary base on some other more desolate world? Where the radio would be either impossible or wholly uncertain, where humanity was not a matter of a few days' trek across mountains or plains? R. F. Starzl, who enjoyed great popularity in the early days of science-fiction, is brought back to modern print with this unusual episode of Mars.

JOHN FARRINGTON looked out of a metal-ringed, thick glass window at a hopeless red landscape, unrelieved by mountain or lake or tree. No sign of water, because the nearest of the great twenty-mile-wide but shallow canals was over a hundred miles away. No sight of blue sky, but a vague reddish void that on rare days darkened to a purplish black, where sometimes the brightest of the stars could be seen hours before the setting of the small but fiercely brilliant sun.

The sun was not fiercely brilliant now. High overhead it rode, but it was only a blob of red in a red sky, and ever higher whirled the clouds of red dust, driven by the fierce autumn winds of Mars. Endless tall, whirling columns of dust walked across the desert's face. Broad, viciously driven lines of dust swept over the horizon and hurled themselves upon the lonely trading post, as if they would demolish it and scatter the aluminum sections far and wide, but the shock of the wind's onslaught was light. Lacking the weight of a dense atmosphere, the Martian storm, for all of its violence, was feeble compared to terrestrial standards. It failed to halt the labors of the natives, who continued to pile bags of borium, a powerful catalytic agent then much in demand on Earth, on the loading platform as fast as it was received from the underground refineries, which extracted the borium direct from the ore body. Grotesquely magnified by the light and shadow distortion of the haze, they plodded stolidly about their tasks in the gathering murk. Occasionally one of them came close enough to the window for Farrington to see the dust on fat, blubbery scales covering arms, legs and back.

There was an apologetic drumming noise in the room behind the trader. It was Nasa. She stood uncertainly beside the double door through which

she had let herself in—herself and a blast of cold. A dry cold—almost the cold of waterless space.

"What is it, Nasa?" the man asked sharply.

She looked at him with the saucer of her great, single eye from which the dust-protective lids were settling away in transparent folds. In a few moments the drumlike membrane of her chest inflated, and from it came sounds—sounds that had startled the terrestrial discoverer, a Miss Columbine, back in 1992. To Farrington the sounds conveyed meaning. Nasa was speaking in the bastard dialect used by the laboring classes of Mars.

"Get your ugly face out of here!" he shouted. "I'll call you when I want you to clean up."

She turned placidly to go, gentle, uncomplaining slave that she was. Farrington was stricken with quick compunction. He called her back and handed her an orange—that strange and luscious fruit, which, above all other importations from the succulent Earth, the Martians craved. Nasa pounced upon the gift, tossed it into her huge, purple-splotched maw, and with many gurgles and snorts of delight she savored its lush sweetness, let the juices trickle slowly and deliciously down her gullet, the while she boomed and purred from her drum-head diaphragm.

"I don't know what's getting into me," Farrington thought. "I'm getting crankier every day. It's lucky those fellows are so good-natured. When I heaved a rock at old Nua yesterday, he just let it bounce off and snored. He could have broken me in two with those steam shovel claws of his."

He put his hands to his temples. "Wonder what's the matter anyway. My head feels like I had a hoop of steel around it. I can't eat; I can't sleep. My eyes feel like they're burning."

He drew a large glass of water from the tank in the corner of the room and gulped it down. He refilled the glass and drank again. Although he filled himself to repletion, he could not slake the thirst that constantly consumed him. Suddenly he dropped the glass and it broke on the stone floor—the second that day. Dizzily he lurched to his cot. He tossed about on it, but soon he dropped off to sleep. When he awoke it was almost night. The wind was gone and stars were brilliant in the purplish black heavens. The Martian laborers had left—gone to their mysterious sub-martian caves, where they lived their half-reptilian lives.

"Don't know what I'm going to do if those spells keep up," said the trader to himself soberly. "Maybe I'd better ask for relief."

The thought galled him. He remembered the eagerness with which he had asked for this post—the most dangerous of all the colonizing points in the far-flung solar system. It had been quickly discovered that the atmosphere of Mars was insidiously hostile to terrestrial life. In the early days many a colonist had been returned, writhing in the throes of a strange madness—a madness in which they babbled of The Dust—The Dust. A madness in which they sought to harm those dear to them.

Farrington had only laughed when Ellsmore, Old Ellsmore, head of the Planetary Civil Service, warned him of dangers at the Borium post.

"It's got some mighty good men, and not all of them recovered," Old

Ellsmore said seriously. "Of course the salary is high on the Martian job, but when you consider the hazards it's not so much. They have to pay a high salary to get a white man to take the job at all. Why not let me fix you out with a nice post on Venus? The City of the Caverns is becoming quite a health resort, and you meet no end of smart people there."

"No," the young engineer said positively. "I don't care to loll around with a lot of professional travelers on a steam-heated planet. Venus is too hot for a white man to get ahead on. Besides, you know how every pimply-faced clerk on Earth wants to be sent to Venus, and the salaries are accordingly. I couldn't marry Alfreda on the salary they pay."

"Don't worry about that, my dear Jack," smiled Ellsmore. "You know that the man who marries my daughter never has to worry about money. I'll——"

"Well, if I do, I *will*!" Farrington interrupted. "Unless I can make a stake I won't feel right about marrying anybody. I want the Borium post. I know I'll be able to fill my quota, and with the bonus it'll bring me, I'll be able to offer Alfreda a safe future."

"I admire your spirit," said Ellsmore sadly. "I hope you hold out long enough to get back safe. Well, go ahead and get ready to start."

Farrington smiled wearily at the quixotic spirit of his youth. His youth! Why, that was only six months ago, Earth time. Just six months, and he was still young. Only twenty-five, but it seemed more. Well, he'd give something to be on that Turkish bath of a Venus right now, or better yet at a certain bend of a sandy creek back home in Texas.

It occurred to him that in six months his schedule called for completion of his quota. He pressed one of a row of buttons on his working desk. Hardly a minute later a trapdoor opened, and one of the Martian checkers climbed up. He was a youngster himself, and patently uneasy.

"Weight. Weight slips—got 'em?" Farrington addressed him eagerly.

The diaphragm tensed, snored placatively. Quickly the creature produced the receipts printed by automatic weighing machines, giving the total for each day. The machines were specially designed to give Earth weights on Mars.

With a joyful thrill Farrington read the figures—127 tons. His quota was only 120 tons. On the instant his mood changed. He felt again the pressure on his temples, the burning in his eyes. He saw the interior of the room through a red haze—red dust.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he roared. He leaped upon the astonished Martian, beat the unresisting creature harmlessly upon its leathery, blubber-filler scales. The protesting, wheedling noises from the diaphragm only increased his rage. He pounded the vocal apparatus of the Martian with his fists until the room was filled as by the low booming of thunder. And then of a sudden the room was alive with Martians. Anxiously, clumsily they picked up the frantic Terrestrial from his victim and carried the latter to bed. Conscious of their helpless concern, Farrington was filled with hate for them, kicked futilely at their ugly, kindly faces. He hated them for their ugliness, their low organization. He hated them for their rank, oily odor.

He hated also those aristocratic ruling Martians, lolling idly in their polished cities near the canals, living on the work and the brain of ancestors centuries ago dead, condescending to trade with the young, brash planet to sunward only for the sake of their palates. He hated their insolence in refusing direct contact with the Terrestrials, transacting all business through their slaves. He hated. . . .

He found that he hated everybody—himself, old Ellsmore, Alfreda even. No, he didn't hate her, but he hated. . . . God! For the strength to kill these beasts!

Water was pressed to his lips. He drank greedily, in long, deep draughts. When the glass was empty he mouthed for more. It was given to him. He lay exhausted. Gradually he drifted to sleep. The last sound he heard was the rustling whispers of his nurses. His last thought was:

"It's got me! It's got me! The Dust Madness has got me!"

When he awoke again it was still night, and the long, single room of the trading building was dimly lighted by the mellow glow of a single ion tube. The natives were all gone except Nasa who, mournfully regarding him, sat on the floor. His head was reasonably clear again, but he dared not move for fear of bringing on another fit of rage before he could do what had to be done. He caught Nasa's eye.

"Lift me—" he commanded guardedly, "lift me to radio!" He shut his eyes again. She lifted him, cot and all, set him down before the simple panel of the automatic transmitter. He reached for a central dial, turned it to the call of his operating base in Brazil. Overhead there was a subdued grinding as the astronomically corrected directional antenna turned to the proper position. A bell tinkled musically, a signal that the carrier wave was going out.

"Hello Rio! Hello! Hello Rio!" he said in ordinary conversational tones. He did not wait for a reply, knowing that minutes must pass before his message could reach the Earth, and minutes more before the answer, speeding at the rate of over 186,000 miles a second, could come back to him. So he gave the whole of his message at one time:

"This is John Farrington, Planetary Civil Service 4B1189, stationed at Borium post, Mars, reporting. We have completed our quota of 120 tons and are ready for relief. Include in next trade shipment 100 cases of cantaloupes and 40 barrels extracted honey. Protect shipment in forward holds better against interstellar cold—the food commissioner here is complaining. Please hurry relief. We have storms every day; the dust is bad. For God's sake hurry, before I go clear crazy!"

Almost instantly there came a reply from the resonant, slightly luminous globe above the panel:

"Buck up, Jack old boy! I'll be with you by daylight. I've been on the way a month, and I'll soon be dodging your dinky little moons. The old ball certainly is dusty; I couldn't see any of the canals or other markings for days on account of the dust."

"Is it you, Steve?" exclaimed the sick man. "By Glory! It is! Boy, Steve, I'm sure glad you're coming—you're sure the best friend I've got."

"Best friend, I hope, and most persistent rival. Fact is, old boy, I came here because Alfreda insisted. She was worried by some of your queer messages. She sent *me*, you understand, who have papers entitling me to command the finest Venerian liners, to take a rickety old hulk to this miserable hole and bring you home. That's what hopeless love will do to a man!"

Farrington put his hands to his temples. They were throbbing again. With quick, nervous movements he kicked the covers off him. With an enormous effort of will-power he tried to keep his voice from shaking. He said levelly:

"Yes, I guess you're persistent all right. I guess you know when to take advantage of a man, when he's killing himself to make a home for a woman. I guess I can see you, those long months that I spent in this hell, hanging around her and turning her silly head with your sympathy——" The pressure in his temples was splitting his head——"When I'm able to get up again—I'll tear you——"

"DONG-NG-NG-NG!"

It was the beginning of the Rio answering message.

"Reply to Borium post: Relief ship has already been sent and at last report was 200,000 miles from Mars. It should be in path of directional radio beam. Ship carries freshly made specific for Dust Madness. Freighter will stop on return from Uranus and load borium. Regarding complaint of frostbitten fruit, Captain Skoglund reported——"

The voice droned on, but Farrington did not hear. With superhuman strength he was struggling with Nasa, struggling to break away and vent his fury; to vent his fury on anything—the delicate instruments ranged around the room, for instance, in lieu of that still unreachable friend whom his madness pictured as a betrayer. He subsided finally amid sobs, accompanied by gulping noises of sympathy from Nasa as she plied him with water.

John Farrington sat in the half darkness of the old dispatch ship's white-painted hospital room. Through small ports of six-inch thick glass he could catch a glimpse of the black sky with its great, steadily glowing stars. The faintly luminous wake of the atomic rockets, fastened at various points on the ship's hull, trailed past the window and off into infinity. Unquestionably the old space ship was making its best possible speed toward the Earth. Steve had mentioned that they were past the half-way point and that soon the rocket tubes would be reversed. They were darting in a grand diagonal to a point of the Earth's orbit, mathematically determined, that would bring the ship to its base near the mouth of the Amazon river.

Farrington felt much better. He had only a vague recollection of having been carried, screaming and fighting, by some of the motley crew in Steve's command. The Martians could not be induced to even approach the ship. They had an overpowering dread of leaving their planet, ever since the disastrous expedition of the year 2025, when hundreds of them, having been induced to embark for Earth, died of tuberculosis in the humid, dense atmosphere so foreign to them.

The specific had again proved its worth. In conjunction with the constantly purified air of the ship it had allayed almost completely the dreadful

attacks of homicidal mania which was for many years to prove an almost insuperable barrier to the permanent colonization of Mars.

The door opened and Steve came in.

"How's the patient this morning?" he smiled cheerily. "You look a little peakish, but you're getting back some healthy color just the same."

"I feel fine, Steve. It doesn't seem possible now that I was so wild a couple of weeks ago. It seems like a dream."

"It was certainly a wild dream. I got a laugh out of your checker. You gave him such a beating on his diaphragm that he could hardly talk. He wasn't sore, though. You certainly put yourself in solid with the Martian work-hogs before the dust madness got you."

"I hope you'll forget about the way I acted, Steve."

"It's all forgotten. It's all over, in fact. You've slept it off. I've used up all the specific, but I don't think you'll need any more. Just drink plenty of water; get the poison out of your system."

"It was awful while it lasted. You've saved my life in more ways than one, Steve. You've treated me as well as any doctor."

"It was that or nothing. They don't send out surgeons on these old tubs. If it wasn't that the underwriters insist upon it, they probably wouldn't even equip us with radio."

They discussed the niggardly policies of the ship owners at length and with considerable warmth. Steve talked of the destruction of a planetoid that had been a peril to shipping, and after they had taken a meal they repaired to one of the empty storage holds that was temporarily fitted up for a gymnasium.

"I'm not so good today," said Steve. "My side kind of hurts, but a good work-out might help it."

They put on the gloves, and for ten minutes there was no talk; just the swift thudding of padded fists, the rapid shuffle of feet, and soon, the panting of breaths.

All at once Steve sat down, and his face was pale. He held his hand to his abdomen.

"Sorry! Sorry, old man! I didn't mean to foul you!" Farrington bent over his friend.

"You didn't foul me, Jack. You never touched me, but my belly sure is getting sensitive. It hurts like it was going to split open." His abdomen was in fact distended and the muscles were tense and hard.

"I guess it's the old appendicitis again," groaned Steve. "It's been bothering me, off and on, for years."

"Let me help you to the hospital cabin. You can sleep in my bed for a while."

"No—ouch! Not yet, anyway! Just let me sit here for a while. It'll get better soon."

But it didn't get better. A half hour later Farrington telephoned to the crew's quarters for help. Two Levantine roustabouts responded and carried the pale and perspiring shipmaster to the hospital. They were unprepossessing fellows, graduates of rough experiences on more than one remote planet.

"You'll have to take charge," Steve said feebly. "You needn't bother about navigation. Krassin and Boloman can handle the instruments all right, and they have their orders. But I guess you'll have to kind of watch me. I guess—I'm afraid—I'm going to—pass out. Alfie—Alfie, hold my hand!"

He was in a raging fever. His abdomen was still distended. His heart thudded terrifyingly.

Farrington rushed to the adjoining radio room. Dialing the Rio station, he demanded preference over all other messages. Without waiting for acknowledgment he recited the symptoms of the shipmaster's attack, closing with a desperate appeal for help. Quickly he unplugged the transmitting and receiving units, and by means of extension cords, set them up again by the bedside of the sick man.

"DONG-NG-NG-NG!"

"Rio station replying to Interplanetary L-4. Dr. Camelard has been called from the infirmary and he already has a printed copy of your message. He will advise you what to do."

A few seconds later the doctor spoke:

"Most likely your patient is suffering from a ruptured appendix. You're lucky if he doesn't get general peritonitis. It's a hell of a note to send out a man with a chronic case like his on a ship full of bums and an invalid. Just the same you're going to save him if it possibly can be done.

"Look around and see if you can locate the standard surgical equipment chest. It'd better be there or some inspector is going to be in trouble. Open the wall cabinets until you find the steam sterilizer. Turn on the power, but don't forget to see that there's water in the boiler.

"While I'm talking to you you can wash your hands. For surgery your hands have to be not only washed, but *scrubbed*. Don't mind if you take off a little hide. Get them *clean*. Then you can rub 'em good with the bichloride of mercury. Fix it double strength. Open a tube of catgut, but don't take it out of the liquid until you need it."

The doctor paused to ascertain if Farrington was following him. In a few minutes he continued:

"Put one of the morphine tablets in his mouth now so he'll be ready when you are. Since you can't perform an operation without assistance, and keep your hands sterile, keep a bowl of chlormercoxol handy. Wash your hands in it every little while as you work.

"You won't need many instruments. Pick out a good sharp scalpel. Find one with a 45 degree blade. Take a couple of forceps and one or two good heavy retractors. You may not need a hemostat, because you're not going to take that man's appendix out. The shape he's in I would hardly dare try that even here. All you've got to do is to make an incision and put in an inch drainage tube. Understand that, just put in a drainage tube to let out the pus, and if you don't get in a lot of dirt, he'll probably recover."

On and on came the matter-of-fact directions. The doctor took each point separately, painstakingly instructing. Occasionally he paused to give Farrington a chance to ask questions. He told him how to locate the right spot, half-way between the navel and a point on the right hip; told him to shave

the drum-tight skin; to wash it with the chlormercoxol, most deadly of all germicides, which would even penetrate tissues to destroy lurking unfriendly organisms.

And all that time Steve lay in shallow but persistent anesthesia. And all that time he babbled of Alfie—Alfreda. He thought she was standing beside him—denying him—denying him the kiss that he yearned for more than all other kisses that were available to a handsome young master of Interplanetary Liners. His hallucinations shifted to the Caribbean. In a hydroplane they were skimming the crests of the dancing waves. She was smiling at him——

"Alfie—Alfie—I love you!"

Beads of sweat stood on Farrington's forehead. He was physically tired. He felt a nausea usually associated with space sickness, though the decelerating effort of the atomic rockets provided a very acceptable substitute for the steadying pull of gravity. If he could only sleep a little! But there lay his friend, utterly helpless. But *was* he his friend? He looked at the partly unclothed form narrowly. Certainly a magnificent body. Certainly a handsome head. Wonder if Alfreda thought so? The pressure of his temples was back. Not so bad, though. He drank deeply, a couple of pints of water.

What was that! Not too far? "Be careful not to go too deeply," the etherborne voice was saying. "Remember, you have a man's life in your hands.

"First you cut through the skin and fat. It won't bleed much. Next you come to the fascia. It's a sort of white, thick skin covering the muscles. Cut through it and you see the muscle. You can split that and won't need to cut much. Just take the handle of a scalpel and separate the fibers. Then you're clear down to the peritoneum, and it's ticklish work for an amateur. You'll find a thin tough membrane investing the viscera. Go very easy in cutting through. A slip of your knife and you might puncture an intestine and your man's done for, with all of the pus and corruption in the cavity. This is the way to do it: You take a little fold of the peritoneum with your fine forceps——"

On and on, endlessly. The room was oppressively silent. That steady pressure on his temples! His eyes burned. Oh, how he longed to rest! "A slip of the knife and he's done for!" Farrington battled against the horrible thought that dogged him. "Just a little slip of the knife" and Steve would stop moaning, "Alfie—Alfie, hold me!"

Forward, in their own quarters, were men. Stupid and brutal, to be sure, except for two busy navigators, but men. Farrington toyed with the thought of bringing one of them up, not to perform the operation, but to watch him—Farrington. He laughed. How could they know? How could anyone know? Just a little slip of the knife; just a little slip, and those restless tossings would soon be stilled. Besides, it wouldn't do to let the men know the seriousness of the situation. Mutiny under such conditions was not impossible. The sweeping voids of space still offered rich possibilities to pirates who were hearty and bold.

"I can't do it! I can't do it!" Farrington cried aloud. "Just one little slip and I'll kill him!"

"... having removed the most of the pus," went on the voice, unperturbed, "notice the color of the intestines. If they are red, inflamed, as if they had been scalded; if the veins are congested, we may safely assume——"

There came a shriek. Farrington's despairing cry had gone over seventy-six million miles of space, and had been heard by one who sat in Rio transmitting station in distracted silence. Her involuntary scream had been picked up and hurled back at the speed of light, and now re-echoed around the dingy cabin.

"Jack!" she sobbed. "Jack, you must! He saved your life, Jack. He saved your life for love of me. Don't fail me, Jack!"

"Take her out!" It was the voice of Dr. Camelard to an assistant.

"Of course you're going to make a success of this, Farrington," he resumed testily. "If you fail, Alfreda will never speak to you again. She has sat here in torture for a long, weary hour. Take hold of yourself, Farrington!"

"Alfie! Alfie!" gasped the sick man.

"... the idea is to insert the tube so that it will permit free drainage—I would give him another morphine tablet now, Farrington—free drainage will permit nature to take care of the trouble. The ruptured appendix may heal, or at any rate he will be tided over until we can operate on him at the hospital here with the high-frequency apparatus, which will be perfectly safe. The thing to do is to keep him alive until then. See that the tube is well in past the peritoneum, and that it isn't obstructed. You sew the flap up as far as possible and put a stitch through the tube to hold it in place.

"Now, then, we're ready to start!"

Farrington seized a scalpel. The iron band around his head was intolerably tight. His eyes burned. He saw the form before him, sometimes in gray light, sometimes in red haze—Red Dust. Hammers were clanging on iron in his brain. Two voices disputed between hammer-blows.

"No one will ever know," urged one. "A little slip, down in that pus and corruption—a little slip!" The voice was thinly eager. It was demoniacal; it was yearning. It hammered on his brain like a sledge on iron, with a bloodthirsty red eagerness—with a dry, cold eagerness. "Just a little slip—just a tiny little slip!"

"He is your friend!" insisted the other voice. It was a warm voice, and very, very weary. "He saved your life. He was sick, but he came to get you in this old tub because there was nobody else available. He could be comfortable and safe if he'd stayed home, but he came even before you asked for help, because he thought you might die if he didn't."

"Your friend!" mocked the sneering red voice. "While you were slaving in that hell-hole for the sake of a woman, he was winning her from you. Your friend! Fool! Don't you know he came because of her, not you?"

"If she loves him," insisted the other voice, still patient, wearier still, "there are plenty of other women. And if you love her, why kill him? After all, he saved you, no matter what his motives. And if you love her, save him for her!"

"The first incision," came the message, "should be practically vertical. Hold the skin firmly between two fingers, stretching it if not already tight——"

Farrington began.

The L-4 settled smoothly in the mooring pit at Rio. A dirty looking mechanic in fatigue uniform unscrewed the bolts holding the door tight to the tall, cylindrical sides. Through the thick glass his head could be seen bobbing up and down as he wound at the heavy screws. With a rasping of corroded hinges the vacuum door swung open. A collapsible gangway slid automatically to the edge of the pit.

The little group at the pit peered anxiously into the semi-darkness of the interior. An elevator descended clicking. Farrington came to the door. He was deathly pale. He walked slackly. He stood aside and motioned with his hand.

Four hospital orderlies quickly entered the ship. They stepped into the elevator with Farrington. There was a long wait. More mechanics came out, squirming over the pitted surfaces of the ship by means of handholds placed at convenient intervals. They connected lines of air-hose to the tank leads, coupled water pipes, replenished the atomic cartridges, replaced the badly worn nozzles of the rockets with new ones of artificially crystallized carbon. Boxes and barrels of air conditioning chemicals were trucked into the ship. Tons of vitiated chemicals cascaded through vents into the reworking hoppers below. It was a scene of cheerful bustle and activity, such as occurred daily at numerous space-ports everywhere on the inhabitable planets of the solar system, but to the little group on the platform it was a scene of dread. They saw that dark door of uncertainty. They awaited the clicking of the elevator.

It came. Almost instantly the four orderlies were in the door. They carried a stretcher. On it was Steve. He was grinning jovially and waved gaily to his friends. A girl detached herself from the group. She rushed to the side of the stretcher. She gave Steve a quick hug and a kiss, and then she was inside the ship. She had to climb a dirty metal ladder and thread her way through a maze of pipes and tanks before she finally found Farrington. He was gazing sadly out of a port at a waving sea of tropical trees.

"Jack!" she said.

"Oh, hello, Alfreda!"

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Oh, sure; you bet!"

"I've something to tell you, Jack."

"I know it already," he said gently. "I hope you and Steve are very happy."

"We're all happy," she said, uncomprehending, "and so relieved! When your radio went dead we didn't know what happened. We could only guess, and worry." She was laughing in glad release from the tension.

"I guess I had to mess up something," he explained. "I had a relapse of that dust thing and was half crazy. I tore that transmitter to bits, after

I'd finished and got Steve to bed. I can't just remember what happened. It was a nightmare!"

"Poor, dear Jack!" she murmured softly. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Why, why—I thought——"

"No more Martian trips for you!" she chattered gaily. "The Board of Directors has voted to appoint you manager of the planetary port at Gibraltar. I'll love it there, and Jack, I'm so glad to think that our children will not have to be born and raised on foreign soil. I'm old fashioned that way. I'd never feel really at home except on the good old Earth."